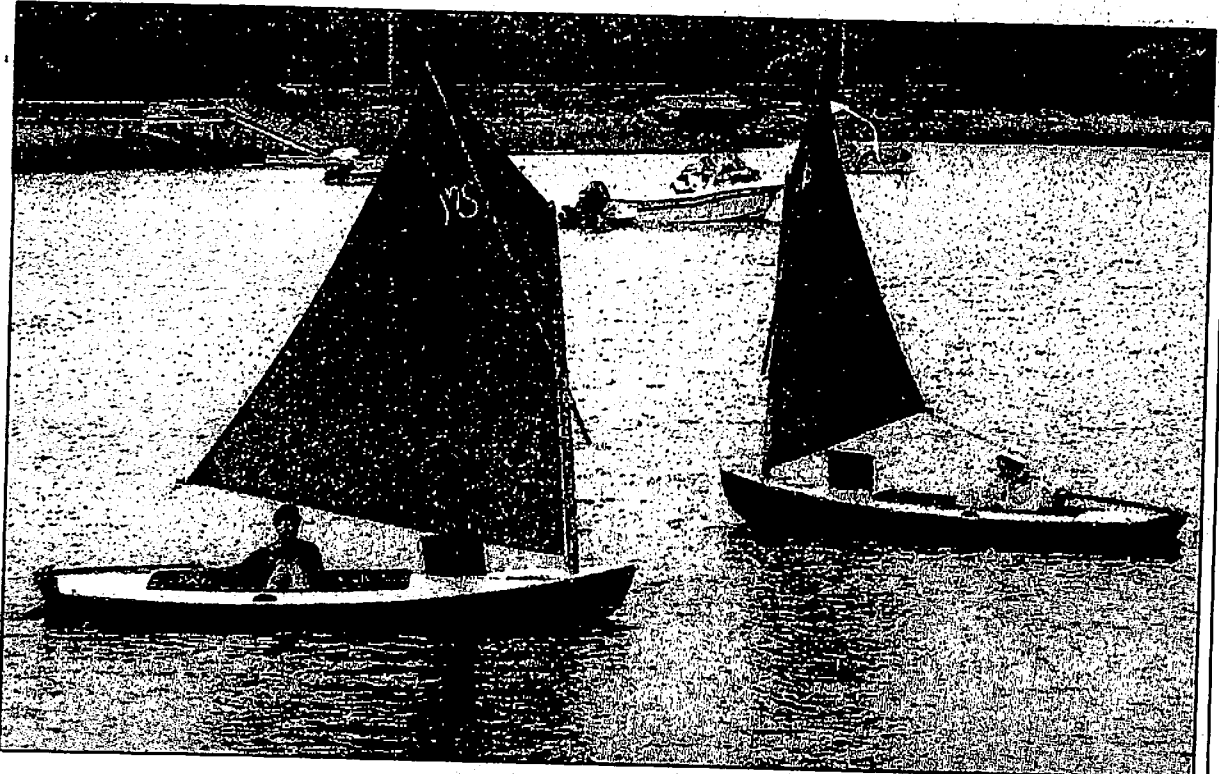


Boston Globe
July 7, 1996



With their distinctive red sails, a couple of Melonseeds catch the wind on Duxbury Bay.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM LANDERS

Love affair with a sailboat

By Anne Harding
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY - Elegant little boats, most with blood red sails, tack across the calm waters of Duxbury Bay. Simplicity rules: Skippers steer by moving a wooden rudder and control speed by manipulating a single rope attached to the sail.

Every year, boat owners come from as far away as Utah and Florida to sail together off Duxbury for two days. The boats are called Melonseeds, the people call themselves Melonheads, and this is the Melonseed Re-

gatta. The Melonheads' devotion, as this name suggests, is total; every one of them talks about his or her 13-foot, 170-pound fiberglass skiff in words and tones usually reserved for a new romantic interest. And their faces, as they sail, have that newly-in-love glow.

"I was just captivated by the beauty of the boat," says Denise Brown, 47, who has flown to Boston from Salt Lake City for her second Melonseed Regatta. "You just sit there right on the water. It's like being in a canoe. You feel every little puff of wind."

The original Melonseed was a wooden boat used by duck hunters to ply the waters of the Chesapeake and

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■ MELONSEED

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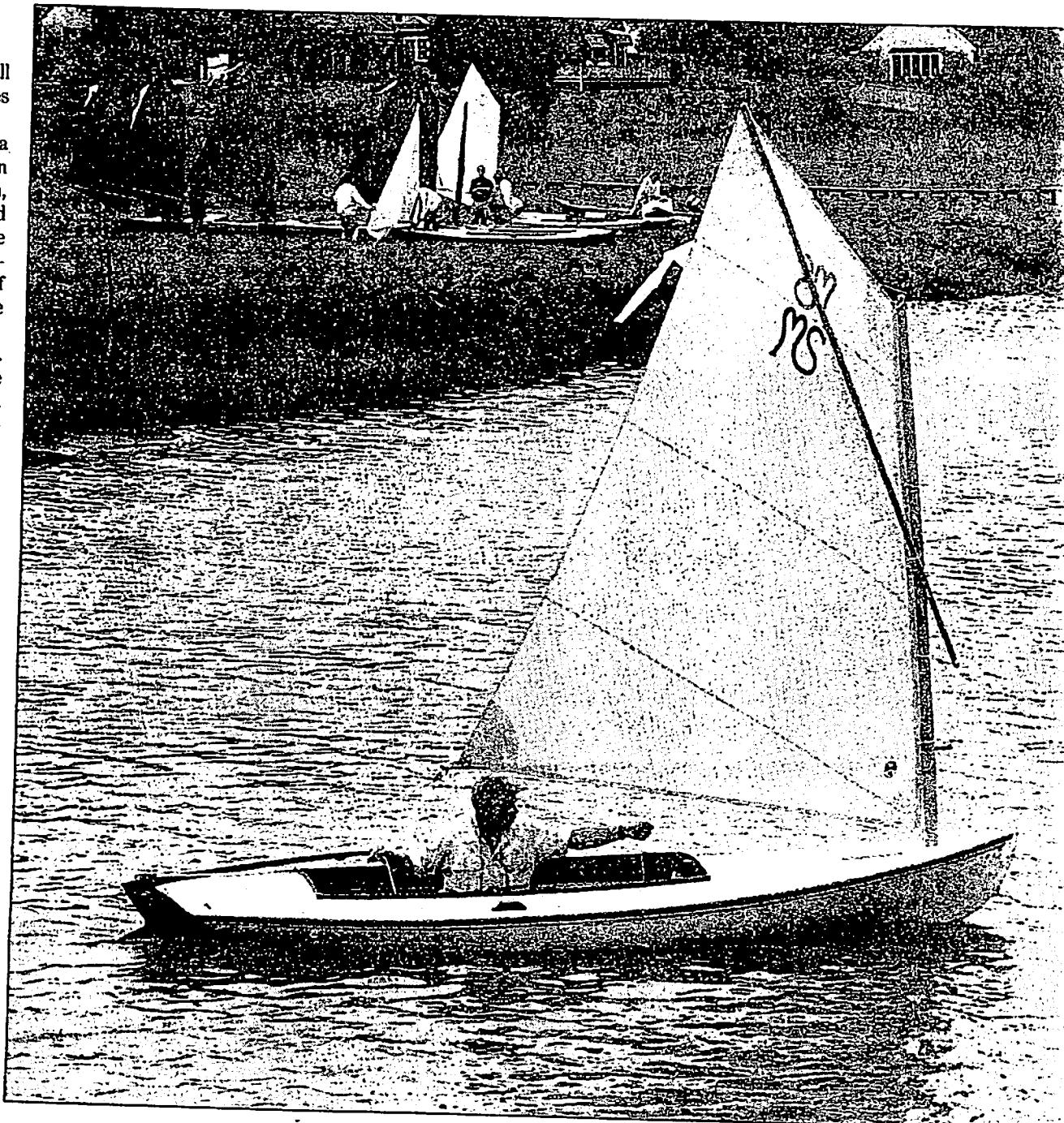
Delaware bays in the late 1800s. Seen from above, the hull looks like a watermelon seed, and that is where the name comes from.

The Melonseed seems to embody a return to simplicity in a downsized era. These easy-to-rig and easy-to-sail boats have an antique beauty that comes from their hundred-year-old design, while modern materials make the boats quick on the water and easy to maintain. The boats are big enough for two, but a single person can prepare a Melonseed for sailing in less than 10 minutes. The sprit rig consists of two spars – slender pieces of Douglas fir supporting the sail – and a single mainsheet (a rope attached to the rear corner of the sail).

Priced at about \$5,000, the Melonseed is an expensive toy. But it requires minimal maintenance and can be stored in the garage or back yard. Easy to transport, the boat can be taken out for a sail on a whim. "It fits into people's lives in two- to three-hour time bursts," said Roger Crawford, who has been building Melonseeds since 1989 and is the only person in the world making them out of fiberglass.

"Quite a lot of the people who are using these boats are doing what corporate America is doing these days – downsizing," said Bob Hicks, editor and publisher of *Messing About in Boats*, a Wenham-based magazine. "They are discovering that an old thing that small is OK."

The stories of the Melonheads – many of whom have given up more costly and complex craft for their beloved little boats – bear out Hicks' theory. Brown, a pilot for Delta Airlines, had plans to buy a \$60,000 cruising sailboat before the Melonseed captured her heart in 1993. "I'm at that point where I'm trying to simplify my life. To buy a big boat – I just think it would complicate my life," she said.



As one sailor plies the waters in his Melonseed sailboat, other Melonheads set up their crafts on a Duxbury marsh.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / TOM LANC

women have bought one-third of Crawford's Melonseeds.

'This is something I can do myself. I am in total charge of this boat. I can do anything but fix a big dent in the fiberglass hull, and Roger can do that. It's a nice boat for a woman. It's a good thing to feel that way about something.'

FRAN NICHOLS, *Duxbury Melonseed owner*

They extol the ease of rigging and sailing them and the simplicity and beauty of the design.

"What sold us on this boat was that a woman can easily rig the boat and sail it herself," said Lisa Beteridge of Duxbury, who bought a white Melonseed - dubbed The Swan Princess by her 8-year-old daughter - last fall with her husband David. The couple called their first sailboat, a 15-foot Marshall, "the boat of contention." "I could only go out on it with David," said Beteridge, who raced large boats in college and wanted to be able to sail on her own.

Fran Nichols of Duxbury sails her Seedling whenever she can, while her 18-foot catboat sits under a tarp in her driveway. "This is something I can do myself," she said. "I am in

total charge of this boat. I can do anything but fix a big dent in the fiberglass hull, and Roger can do that. It's a nice boat for a woman. It's a good thing to feel that way about something."

Nichols first laid eyes on a Melonseed in January 1990, when the Duxbury Clipper newspaper sent her out to photograph a little fleet of Melonseeds gathered on the bay. "I was using a 135 lens by mistake, and all I could see in the lens was the hull. I thought, 'Oh my goodness, what is that?'"

Many Melonseed owners say joining the Melonhead community is one of the best things about buying the boat.

"They're good people to be around," said Cathy Norton of Plymouth, who is sailing with her 8-year-old son, Michael. "You don't only get a boat, you get a social life." Melonheads say of one another (and of themselves) that they aren't snobby or competitive, qualities often associated with sailing and yachting.

Hicks agrees: "The Melonseed people aren't out there to race. They're out there enjoying each other's company."

After about an hour of milling about in the small inlet near Nichols' cottage, the Melonseed fleet was ready to head across the bay to Clark's Island. The boats, 33 in all, set out, with Crawford in hull No. 100 (he had not found a name for it yet) toward the end of the pack and Roger Rodibaugh, an Indiana chiropractor, leading in Melonseed hull No. 1.

Looking out on the field of Melonseeds with rudder and mainsheet in hand, Crawford pointed out the idiosyncrasies of each boat. None are exactly alike, he said. "They're like children, they all have personalities," he said, adding later, "I wonder if things don't sometimes have a spirit."

Crawford likes to tell the story of how the Melonseed found its way to his doorstep - "like Moses in a basket."

Someone had done a sloppy job of building a wooden Melon-

seed from old plans, and the current owner wanted Crawford to rebuild the boat in fiberglass. Crawford was afraid he would fall in love with the boat, spend too much time rebuilding it and lose money. "I had a reputation at the time for being a softy," he said. Staving off the inevitable, he stowed the boat under a cover behind his Marshfield shop. Every once in a while he would take a peek at it. Finally, he took on the project and fell in love. He has built 127 Melonseeds since then.

Crawford began building boats in 1973 as part of his search for a lifestyle, he says. "Back in the 1970s I was one of 20 or 30 guys setting up small shops, growing beards and anointing themselves boatbuilders," he said. Unlike most, however, Crawford was able to make a living at it and even a name for building fiberglass replicas of traditional working boats. His first success was the Swampscott Dory, a design developed by his mentor, Jon Blanchard of Plymouth.

These days, Crawford has a trim silver mustache and works seven days a week with his partner, John Dietenhoffer, building mostly Melonseeds. The shop turns out 24 to 26 boats a year. Although the demand for Melonseeds is increasing and Crawford has all the work he can handle, he has no plans to hire more help. "I'm too much of a control freak," he said.

The group did not get too far out before a threatening gray sky led Crawford to call them back toward the inlet. "The weather is getting a little thick," he hollered to another sailor, who passed the word. The Melonseeds switched direction and headed back toward the inlet.

As the fleet sailed back, the appeal of these little boats became clear. The simple rigging makes it easy to learn what makes a sailboat go and the difference between upwind and downwind and tacking and jibing – without risking getting your head knocked off by having the boom swing over when you're not ready. Tacking in a Melonseed is a matter of pulling the rudder back, letting the sail pass over (you don't even have to duck) and scuttling over to the opposite side of the boat.

The boat is also phenomenally quiet, allowing the sailors a close look at a snowy egret and several cormorants during the trip back.

After the Melonseeds have collected in more protected waters, the Melonheads continue to sail back and forth across the



Roger Crawford, Melonseed boat builder, sits on one of the 13-foot, 170-pound fiberglass skiffs.

inlet, calling to one another as their paths cross. Then, of course, the sun comes out, giving the hazy late-afternoon sky a golden glow.

Cathy Norton and her son Michael are among the last to bring their boats up on the marsh grass. Norton's husband, who died in 1993, had wanted her to buy a Melonseed. "He kept saying, 'It's the perfect boat for you,'" Norton said. She and her husband sailed together the first week they met and had spent much of their marriage, until Michael was born, sailing. But it took Norton a while to decide to follow her husband's advice. "I was not the sailor, I was the passenger," she said. "This was a big step for me to invest in something I was going to have to handle."

Norton finally bought a Melonseed in 1994, and she does not regret it. "When I lost him, I felt I had lost a big part of him because of the sailing. Now I don't feel like I lost it. I got it back," she said. "I'm not giving it up just 'cause he's not here."

Then, after shucking off her foul weather clothes, Norton took Michael out for a swim and a few more turns around the bay in their Melonseed.